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## TRANSFORMATION OF TYPO-MORPHOLOGY OF COLUMBIA CIRCLE IN SHANGHAI CHANGING DISTRICT

**Abstract:** This paper studies transformation of the typo-morphology of Columbia Circle in Shanghai Changning District from 1931 to 2018. Columbia Circle was initiated as a real estate project and became a valuable historic area with master pieces. The typo-morphology of Columbia Circle has gone through a significant transformation process from a suburb to the inner city during different periods of time. Through a diachronic study, the typo-morphology of Columbia Circle in different periods can be presented in several diagrams, which locate the specific variants of morphology in each period. Based on typological reading, the authors aim to explore the rules of its transformation process which reveal social and cultural forces behind. Some questions are raised in this research, i.e. what is the typo-morphology transformation process of Columbia Circle? How to define different phases according to the typo-morphological features? How is the current typo-morphology changing? How does the physical transformation reflect on the changing of social conditions of Columbia Circle? After a preliminary study, the authors conclude five transformation periods: main construction period, second phase construction, plan lot subdivision, property subdivision and property reunification. Specific character of urban morphology and building types reflect the changing of social conditions in concession, from construction to localization and eventually to gentrification. The research of Columbia Circle presents the influence of social forces on typo-morphology, which enlightens the policy making for urban regeneration and heritage preservation in Shanghai's historical districts.

**Keywords:** typo-morphology, historic area, urban regeneration, social influence.

### Introduction

In 1930s, many garden villas were built in Shanghai, and Columbia Circle in Changning District was one of them. It was initiated as a real estate project designed by a famous Hungarian architect Hudec. Columbia Circle is located in Xinhua historic conservation area now. In September of 1924, while the warlords fighting around Shanghai, the concession authorities took advantage of the chance to build roads beyond the concession boundaries. The next year, 13 new roads were built in the west Shanghai, including Avenue Amherest (now Xinhua Road). Political activities occurred frequently then, which threatened the foreigners in the concessions. The Puyi real estate company, which was founded by Raven, an American investor, acutely sensed the business opportunities and bought hundreds acres of the land in this quiet area to build upscale communities for foreign residents.

The project was located in west suburban area based on the map drawn in 1928 (Fig.1). The estate company initially drew an aerial view rendering (Fig.2) for selling the villas, which depicted the image of living in the suburban area in 1930s. Garden villas of low density were seated in spacious green land, open to the surroundings.

These villas present homogeneous expressions towards the landscape in all directions, responding to the wide view which has no specific limitations. Under the rendering picture there was an advertising propaganda, saying "Puyi Ideal Neighborhood". The Columbia Circle project was built in different periods, which followed the initial land division. There were villas constructing until 1940s.

After more than 80 years, the external environment and physical conditions of the site both have experienced apparent changes. The physical space transformation reveals social changes rather than being an isolated evolutionary process. We can comb the history from four aspects: urban fabric, plan lot division, building types and social process.

To begin with, the external environment of the house has changed from the countryside to urban area. The site has been gradually brought into the urban core after decades of development, so the urban fabric has changed apparently. Next, the land lot division of the villas has been transformed. Moreover, except for the garden villas, each period has generated relevant new building types. One final point is the social process which has influenced the properties of those villas. These properties of the villas have undergone a complicated process of transformation, starting as a unified property, then experiencing subdivision, and recently converging into one property again. Based on the transformation from these 4 perspectives, we can divide the historical transformation of Columbia Circle into 5 different periods. Since the periodic transformation appeared so remarkably, Columbia Circle can be treated as a unique example to show the transition of the garden residential blocks in Shanghai.



Figure 1. Plan of Shanghai in 1928. Source: Li Feng. Columbia Circle: Transformation of the Social Fabric's of A Garden Residence in Shanghai [D]. Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, 2011:10

### Transformation process

**Main construction (1928-1932).** In this period, Columbia Circle was considered as a suburb area in the west of Shanghai. Fifteen single houses were built in 1930, and until 1932 this number went up to approximately 30. The urban fabric was characterized by separated buildings and low density of development, which cohered with the rural image of the propagating poster (Fig 2). Every house had its own garden according to original planning of lot division. Single house was the only building type, such as Xinhua Villa District in St. 211 (Fig 4). Each house was an independent property, and most of them were owned by foreign nationals.

**Second phase construction (1933-1949).** This period stretches from the Second World War to the foundation of PRC. The building type remained homogeneous. At least three more single houses were added to Columbia Circle, some of them were designed in modern style. The lot division remained mostly the same as the first period, except some small adjustments catering to the clients' need. According to the city map in 1945, 56 houses located in lots planned by the 1930's planning, 10 more lots with houses were added to the area, and some other lots were still



green space or farmlands. In year 1937, the Sino-Japanese War caused some of the foreign nationals left their residences, which were later occupied by local immigrants. After 1941, the residents were banished by the Japanese and then took control of those houses. Shortly before the foundation of PRC, most inhabitants including foreign nationals left, and the property was reclaimed by government or purchased by locals.



Figure 2. Aerial view rendering of Columbia Circle in 1930. Source: Li Feng. Columbia Circle: Transformation of the Social Fabric's of A Garden Residence in Shanghai [D]. Hong Kong: The University of Hong Kong, 2011:10

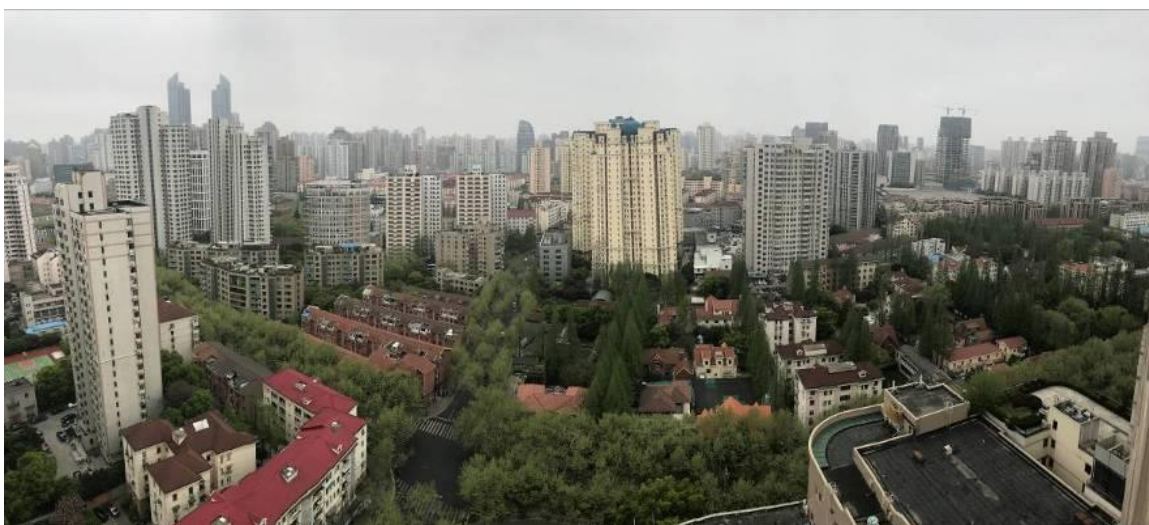


Figure 3. Aerial view photo of Columbia Circle in 2018. Source: photographed by authors

**Lot subdivision (1950-1970).** This period began as the new China was founded, in which the social conditions changed drastically. The people's commune movement caused the subdivision of lots. Take Unit A, No. 32, St. 329 for example, two courtyards of two houses were divided to four courtyards, and new building expansions were added. Along with the increased density and more buildings aggregated, Columbia Circle was no more a suburb area for garden villas, but a part of crowded urban district. The transformation of urban fabric brought a demand for privacy, so that more walls were built to protect the privacy. Furthermore, new building types were generated, such as the 17 social houses embedded in Columbia Circle between 1970 and 1980.

**Property Subdivision (1950-1999).** The early phase of this period started together with lot subdivision. As the lots subdivided, the properties of the houses changed. The main characteristic of the change was subdivision. The phenomena occurred in most houses with more than ten families living in one unit. What happened was a localization process, and its background was the increasing housing need. In 1980s the population of Columbia Circle peaked. For example, there were 327 households, totally 1400 inhabitants lived in St. 211 and St. 327 in 1986. Thirteen families crowded in Unit B, No. 38, St. 329, which was one single house (Fig. 6). The house No.15 across the alley was in the same situation until today (Fig. 5). In 1990s, some new villas and small office buildings were implanted into the open space among existing ones. Eventually the originally planned plots of Columbia Circle were gradually filled up, and with different building types: garden villa, social housing, modern villa and small office building.

**Property Reunification (2000-2018).** The trend of property reunification developed itself in 21<sup>st</sup> century, which was mainly driven by gentrification force. The households in single houses decreased. Many of the locals left Columbia Circle, and they were compensated for relocation with money and new residences. After that, some of the empty rooms were rented to new immigrants. Others were bought and reunified as a whole, and reused as private clubs, luxury restaurants or villas again respectively. The case of unit B, No. 38, St. 329, the property of which was divided into 13 households, and yet bought up by current owner, was recovered as villa “Ni House” (Fig. 6, Fig. 7). The renewal was designed and guided by Atlier Xuk. This kind of gentrification progress can be observed similarly in the surrounding area of French Concession, and in a more extreme way, such as the house in No. 888, Julu Road. When its property was bought up, the new owner totally demolished it and intended to rebuild regardless of its value as historic heritage, despite the full rigor of the law.



Figure 4. Xinhua Villa District in St. 211.  
Source: photographed by authors



Figure 5. House No.15, St. 329, several families with their own vegetable gardens.  
Source: photographed by authors








Figure 6. Unit B, No. 38, St. 329 before its renovation. Source: photographed by Atelier Xuk



Figure 7. Unit B, No. 38, St. 329 renovated as "Ni House". Source: photographed by authors

Table

Transformation process of Columbia Circle (1930-2018)

Period	Year	Plan	Feature
Main Construction	1930		Homogeneous type Independent property Foreign nationals Suburb area
Second phase construction	1949		Homogeneous type Households changed
Lot subdivision & Property Subdivision	1990		Varied types Subdivision of lots Subdivision of property Urban district Increased density Walls for privacy Expansions of buildings Localization of inhabitants
	1999		
Property Reunification	2018		Varied types Reunification of property Reuse of buildings Gentrification process Compromise of historic heritage

### Conclusion

Based on the analysis of the transformation of the typo-morphology of Columbia Circle in Shanghai Changning District from 1931 to 2018, we can conclude that this area has gone through 5 transformation periods from the initial real estate project to part of the valuable historic area with master pieces. The five transformation periods are main construction period, second phase

construction, plan lot subdivision, property subdivision and property reunification. Columbia Circle, as a historic estate project, has an obvious typo-morphology transformation process as the external environment of the house changing from countryside to urban area. This transformation process is still significant in today's context of Shanghai.

After decades of merging into the urban fabric, Columbia Circle has witnessed the mixture of more building types, and increasing density and diversification of the area. Specific characters of urban morphology, plan lot division and building types reflect the changing of social conditions in concession, from construction to localization and eventually to gentrification. Due to the raising land price in the downtown and increasing interest to the Shanghai's modern architecture heritage, Columbia Circle has again attracted the developers' eyes in recent years. The private capital has been instilled into the historic residential buildings, which transforms the buildings into private villas, clubs or company. How can the historic residential area responds to the gentrification tendency? Perhaps, more refined policies and regulations should be enacted. The research of Columbia Circle presents the influence of social forces on typo-morphology, which enlightens the policy making for urban regeneration and heritage preservation in Shanghai's historical districts.

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